

Gary Public Library
By Gregg Abell

Every once in awhile an historic researcher has a “eureka” moment. As a researcher you accept that it often takes a lot of work to uncover the facts about a story. But, once in awhile you uncover a treasure trove of information. That was my experience at the Gary Public Library.

For the last several years I have been writing National Register nominations for the not-for-profit preservation organization, *Partners in Preservation*. One of the opportunities they offered me was to research and write several historic district nominations within the City of Gary. Four of these districts were located within the areas of the city that had been developed by the Gary Land Company (GLC), a land holding subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation. These four districts enveloped much of what was the original company built town.

It was another Gary research project, a National Register nomination for Theodore Roosevelt High School, that led me to the archives of the Gary Public Library - I had been told that the library might contain a copy of the original W. B. Ittner blueprints for the school. While inquiring about these files, I became aware of the existence of the *Gary Land Company Architectural Files* which the library possesses. This chance happening revealed a significant amount of information pertaining to the construction of the residential areas of the company town and became a valuable research asset in the writing of the three National Register historic district nominations. These blueprint files revealed the architect and builder's names, the materials of construction and size of the house along with an estimated building cost and their locations and the approval date and sign-off by the GLC stamped onto the back of the architectural drawings.

A find like this is what every researcher dreams of. Within the three historic districts that were being researched, there existed a total of four-hundred and seventy-two sites. I selected ninety-six of them to research and write narratives on for the three nominations. When I checked the collection I found fifty-one original prints, or 53% of my selected ninety-six sites. This was an exceptional primary historic source!

It was the GLC's responsibility to regulate the sale and development of all properties within the areas purchased by the United States Steel Corporation, residential, commercial and industrial. As part of the regulating process, Captain Horace S. Norton, director of the GLC for thirty years, required that everyone wanting to build within these areas needed to submit a set of building plans for his approval. Norton and the United States Steel Company had set standards for those that it would allow to reside within the company owned areas of their new city. This process was in effect for over thirty years and is the origin of these architectural resource treasures.

The GLC architectural files are not all that the Gary library archives holds. According to a 1935 University of Chicago master's degree dissertation, written by Minnie Margaret Ravenscroft, part of the purpose for the creation of the archives was to become a central archival preserve, not just for Gary, but also for Lake County and Calumet Region history. As I spent time in the archives, I was able to peruse the shelves and vertical files and stumbled across many unique items. The difficulty is that the archives is disorganized; even worse is that much of the GLC collection is in a distressed condition, with many of its files misplaced or missing. Just consider that the *Gary Land Company Architectural Files* are nearing one-hundred years of age and

presently rest in a damp, non-climate controlled portion of the library's basement. The entire archive collection needs some TLC so that it may be preserved for use by future generations.

Many of us are aware of the physical deterioration and decay of the once vital industrial city of Gary. Much of Gary's early architecture has already been lost because of the city's tough economic situation and resulting demolition. Sadly the economy is also affecting these archives. The Gary Public Library, like the city, has financial problems. For the last year the main library, where the collection is housed, has been closed and the archives have been boxed up and stored – making them inaccessible for study.

According to the library, it will be at least another year before the collection will again be available. However, there is some concern amongst regional historians about whether these archives will ever be accessible to the public again. Even more than this, the question is whether or not that they can be cared for and preserved properly under the library's current financial situation and be in condition to review when they are available again.

It is understood that the library must look at the overall needs of their community to guide them as to where to put its finances to use. The public demand for the archives is minimal when compared to some of the other, more necessary, services that are needed by the community. But, the archives within the Gary Public Library are important to fully understanding the history of the Calumet Region, especially the early industrial era of the Twentieth Century. Their loss would be a great catastrophe to the understanding of the history of Gary and the Calumet Region. The situation that exists in Gary is not unique. Many local history repositories, libraries and historical societies, across Indiana and the nation are faced with many of the same financial decisions.

One wonders what type of public responsibility should be placed upon the keepers of these archives to keep them available to the public. It seems that it should be as important to preserve historic archives as it does to preserve a historic site or structure, for without the availability of these often unique resources the significance of those sites may never be truly uncovered. Tough economic times have created many financial problems that make it difficult for communities to function and often funding for programs that would secure these archives are just not available, or maybe more realistically, their value is just not recognized because they are used by a small portion of society. One would hope that when this happens that these communities could find another alternative then to just shutting them up and closing them down.

There needs to be a great deal of attention and loving care applied to these small, local enclaves of historic knowledge, they hide many treasures. It can be hoped that all the small, needy, historic repositories have their own "eureka" moments and find the funding to preserve their historic records. Many are out there trying. If there were a "most endangered" list of local history archives, Gary would surely be on that list.

POSTSCRIPT: One possible solution for the Gary archives, if funding could not be found, would be to find another archival repository that could temporarily, or permanently, house and help conserve these archives. There are several possibilities at the state level that could help with this. Gary has been through a lot over the past decades and to lose access to its historic archives would be tragic to the understanding of the city's true place in history.